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LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS
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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: ECON ENRG PGOV ER
SUBJECT: ERITREA POWER GRID RUNNING ON "LUCK"

REF: ASMARA 065

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Eritrea's main generators, located in Massawa, are one overhaul away from a country-wide power failure, according to representatives from Eritrea's fuel industry. The four generators are currently operating beyond recommended capacity, doing the work of six generators. Critical overhaul would cost the GSE $100 million and would require disruptive shutdowns. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ordinarily, an electrical grid would have six generators, running four at a time and alternating every few months to the two spare generators. The process allows for regular repairs and keeps the generators from being overworked. However, Massawa's four generators run constantly and are often temporarily shut down for minor repairs. This is the situation that likely happened June 5-9 when Asmara experienced lengthy power outages. Although the Ministry of Energy referred to the problem as "some minor technical issues in Massawa," insiders to Eritrea's energy situation speculate the overworked generators were once again shut down for maintenance and repairs. The Ministry of Energy maintains that Eritrea has the technical expertise in-country to repair the generators. While this may be true, mused one energy expert, the country has neither the expertise nor the foreign capital to overhaul the generators, which is recommended every five years; the generators have not been overhauled since installation in the late 90s. Additionally, shutting the generators on and off as repairs are needed rather than taking the time for a full system overhaul inevitably shortens the life of the generators. At this point, he continued, the generators are running on "luck."

¶3. (SBU) In the past, the GSE has avoided country-wide power failures through just-in-time deliveries of fuel and lubricant (reftel). One energy analyst asserted the GSE still had a nine months supply of lubricant and at least 40 days of fuel to run the generators. The problem now, however, is possible equipment failure. The generator in the border city of Tessenei failed three weeks ago due to worn out pistons. Rather than replacing the pistons, which would cost the GSE hard currency, the GSE simply switched to a low-viscosity lubricant. Overhauling the four main generators in Massawa would cost approximately $25 million per generator and would cause disruptive shutdowns and outages.
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